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ABSTRACT

An overview of innovative curriculum programs to increase student retention, with a focus on vocational instruction, is presented in this paper. The Pennsylvania Dauphin County Technical School is described, which utilizes a practical performance-oriented approach and individualized instruction in a vocation clusters system. The review of research concludes that a high correlation exists between student participation in vocational education and retention. To achieve a zero percent dropout rate, dropout prevention programs must relate traditional academic courses to student vocational preparation and incorporate a more flexible, diverse curriculum. A vocational decidedness questionnaire is included. (5 references) (LMI)

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INFLUENCE OF VOCATIONAL DECIDEDNESS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

Senator Edward Kennedy (September, 1988) tells us that according to the available research, dropouts will earn much less money, suffer more unemployment, have more health problems, and be more dissatisfied with their personal lives than those who complete high school. This situation does not affect just the individual according to the Committee for Economic Development, over the lifetimes of one year's "class" of dropouts, the nation loses $240 billion in foregone earnings and taxes. When we add the billions spent for crime control, welfare, health care, and other social services that unproductive citizens require, it becomes apparent that when students drop out of school, all citizens lose.

In A NATION AT RISK; THE REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION, (Mitchell, 1988), the authors take the position that the best way to prepare students for college is a standardized, college-preparatory curriculum. They further state that this is the best

curriculum for all students--collegebound or not. Many educators do not agree with this position. In the 1930s a study was conducted to determine whether students who did not follow a collegebound curriculum, but later decided to attend college would be as successful as those who were enrolled in a collegebound curriculum. Agreements were reached with over 300 colleges and universities that they would waive their entrance requirements for graduates of 30 schools for a period of five years who wanted to experiment with curriculum. These students would be accepted into these colleges and universities no matter what courses they had completed.

In 1932 the Commission on Secondary School Curriculum was established to help the schools develop innovative approaches to learning.. Its major purpose was to focus attention on the educational requirements of high school students, to suggest methods of studying curriculum problems, and to further well-considered experimentation in fundamental aspects of curriculum revision. This effort known as the Eight-Year Study studied the needs of adolescents and developed a curriculum focused on meeting needs, as well as on preparing youth for future roles in society.

The teachers involved designed programs which required students to deal with problems they felt were significant, and to share in the responsibility of defining problems, formulating hypotheses, and collecting, organizing, and

interpreting data. These teachers departed from tradition both in school and after school. They were free to concentrate on the needs of the students rather than just focusing attention solely on getting students into college.

A total of 1,475 students were followed from their freshman year in high until they left college, each one being carefully matched with a student from a school with a traditional college preparatory curriculum. The students enrolled in the nontraditional curriculum not only equalled the achievement of the comparison group, they surpassed it--sometimes dramatically, sometimes slightly, but consistently these students performed better!

Additionally, 25 colleges underwent intensive studies and 20 more contributed substantially to the original study. Questionnaires to follow up the students were distributed to 120 other colleges. The data collected represented 189,000 credits earned over a period of 6,400 student years. On a whole, the so-called Thirty-Schools graduates were found to have higher grades; to be more systematic, precise, and objective; and to show more ingenuity in meeting new situations. When compared with graduates of more traditional schools, the nontraditional graduates participated more in the arts and contributed more to literary publications. Twenty percent more of them exhibited interest in contemporary affairs, and as a group, they received slightly more academic honors and 7 percent more nonacademic honors. A separate study showed that those

who benefited more were the students who were the most talented.

This study proved that what mattered most was not the content of courses taken, but the development in students of powers of mind necessary to do college work. Since there are many ways in which this can be done, it is possible for schools to focus on the needs of students without having the kind of rigid, standardized curriculum called for in A Nation at Risk.

This study concluded in 1940 and was not able to be extensively publicized due to the beginning of World War II. It points out that excellence doe not in any way require standardization or uniformity. In many instances, the best kind of schools are those that have a clear sense of their own purposes and develop programs based on the needs of their own communities, and those in which teachers feel they have a real voice in curriculum shaping decisions. These conditions appear to remain the same today.

According to more recent data, Weber (September, 1988) states that longitudinal studies comparing dropouts with those who completed high school have found a definite correlation between participation in vocational education and retention of students in high school. When students decide what their career objectives are and take classes that they feel will help them to obtain ose career goals, they will have a tendency to remain in high school. However, the findings conversely suggest that those who will

become dropouts do not do much in the way of preplanning their high school programs, nor do these students participate in the mainstream of vocational education classes. These future dropouts are more likely to take exploratory courses than job-skills courses, and they are often involved in work-study experiences that do not appear to be directly related to their overall programs rather than the work experience programs that are directed towards a particular occupational area. In addition, these students usually are not involved in any extracurricular activities that help students crystalize their future expectations and goals.

The general characteristics of at-risk students have been described through research as an IQ that is below average, poor basic skills and test scores that are below grade level. Some have repeated grades, have negative attitudes toward school, don't get along with teachers, are poor, from minority groups and often lack family support towards education.

Weber describes exemplary local programs for dropout prevention that have similar organizational and operating characteristics despite differences in location, district size, strategies of procedure, and the groups of students served by the school district. He stated the following features common to nine programs studied:

1. General organization. These programs take place in non-traditional school environments and usually function

somewhat autonomously. They have smaller than average teacher-pupil ratios and pay particular heed to ninth graders with special emphasis on "the whole student." Their teaching strategies include combining remedial basic skills, parental involvement, counseling, support services by ancillary personnel, and training in vocational skills.

2. Staffing. These school programs provide flexibility for staff members. These members must be willing and able to establish student-teacher relations that are more demanding than under traditional programs. They must also keep abreast of their students' needs. It is essential that teachers be committed to the philosophy and goals of this nontraditional program.

3. Instruction. In these programs, about half of the instructional time is spent on remediation, especially in basic skills; a quarter on meeting students' personal needs, and the last quarter of their work-related needs. The teachers must also do a good deal of individualized instruction. One of the contributing aspects of this program is its marked variance from the traditional high school program.

Weber further states that virtually everywhere that "school reform" has taken hold in the high school curriculum, the results tend toward a single, demanding academic curriculum for all students; this, of course, leaves very little room for a concentration on vocational education. It appears that this type of unidimensional

academic curriculum falls far short of meeting the needs of all high school students--particularly at-risk students. He feels that if this trend continues, the nation's schools are unlikely to achieve very much success in stemming rising dropout rate.

Contrary to John I. Goodlad's opinion in A Place Called School, the differences observed in vocational and non-vocational classrooms (Appendix, Table 2), lend weight to the belief that vocational classrooms are more student centered, more activity based, and more individualized than traditional classrooms. These three characteristics help in preventing high school students from losing interest in school. These programs offer a clear alternative to students who normally have difficulty succeeding in a traditional academic environment. The hands-on, performance oriented approach typically found in vocational education classrooms, the tying in of instruction to the workplace, the individualized and small-group activities, the task-oriented interpersonal community, the opportunities for reinforcing basic skills, the necessity for decision making and working toward task goals, the opportunities to experiences success all make vocational education an important part of keeping at-risk students in high school.

Polto and Rhen (March, 1988) studied another innovative curriculum that works. The Pennsylvania Dauphin County Technical School (DCTS) is currently in the fourth year of a program that goes to unusual lengths to integrate academic

and vocational instruction. DCTS is a comprehensive vocational high school serving 800 full time students in grades 10 through 12. The failure of traditional methods of presenting academic subjects, as evidenced by low test scores on standardized mathematics and English tests, gave rise to the implementation of a "cluster concept." This meant grouping students by occupational areas both as an administrative convenience and a preliminary step in this program. The construction cluster consisted of students in the building trades--masonery, carpentry, electrical engineering and plumbing. DCTS dissolved the academic departments and made academic teachers a part of vocational clusters. This included a cluster of students attending academic classes as well as laboratory classes together.

This cluster concept allowed the school to use industry's quality circle approach, with teachers within the clusters forming a circle. This greatly increased the teachers` communications with the administrators and allowed them to exchange professional views with fellow teachers, thereby fostering teamwork. As a result, competency-based instruction in academic courses was set us as it already had been in the vocational courses. The philosophy of the administration was that if teachers presented traditional academic subjects so that students could see a relationship to their vocational preparation, they would be more receptive to academic courses. They also felt that students learn more quickly if they can see the applicability of

academic skills and use them immediately. The program is having results, with students' mathematics scores going up and reading scores no longer declining. The students are quite responsive and enthusiastic as shown by the enrollment and classroom behavior, teachers' attitudes and Board of Education testimony to this effect.

This cluster concept began in 1983 because DCTS educators became concerned that many students did so poorly and dropped out of school because they found traditional academic classes boring; hence, they did not develop academic skills. In addition to showing students how specific academic skills apply to specific tasks, teachers attempt to relate academic skills to the world of work. The teachers want students to develop the ability to adapt and explain that they will be able to apply their vocational skills in a variety of jobs and enable them to adjust to changing technologies.

The staff has reconstructed the language arts curriculum to assure continuity between 10th and 12th grades. Many of the technical reports that students write are designed to carry over from year to year so that they can build upon their occupational and communication skills. This enables them to develop a report for actual use rather than as an exercise. The staff is also integrating the language arts curriculum with other academic curricula, and they are beginning to adapt other disciplines, like social studies.

Because of its obvious relevance, the mathematics curriculum proved to be the easiest to integrate into the vocational program. As an example, while learning the concept of the triangle in class, manufacturing students are allowed to use it in sheet metal or other manufacturing projects. The clustering concept allows the teacher to direct the lesson and choose examples that enable students to receive the maximum benefits from learning the concepts.

At DCTS all the curricula are now at least partially integrated. The goal is to give students and potential employers an achievement record that shows the academic competencies mastered as well as simply letter grade reports.

Programs like the ones explained above need to be expended at much faster rates that we are now doing if we are to assure the successful completion of high school by a larger percentage of our high school students. Our goal must be a zero percent dropout rate. If our dropout rate does not decrease, the unemployment rate will rise and more of the population will be at risk.

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VOCATIONAL DECIDENESS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. At what grade did you decide upon the career you are currently in or pursuing.

2. How did your high school classes prepare you for that career.

3. How many minutes do you think high school classes should last?

4. If employed, what skills that you learned in high school helped you attain your job?

5. Which classes did you like that you did not have an adequate background to be successful in?

6. What classes did you take where you felt the subject matter had already been covered in previous classes?

7. What required class(s) would you like to have had an additional course(s) in?

8. What elective courses would you like to have had an additional class(s) in?

9. What required classes did you consider as a waste of your time?

10. What elective class(s) did you consider as a waste of your time? Why?

11. What class(s) did you regret enrolling in? Why?

12. What class(s) did you always look forward to attending? Why?

13. What classes leading toward your career choice would you have taken if they had been offered at your high school?

14. What classes did you avoid taking because you thought they were too difficult?

15. What classes did you avoid taking because you thought you would not learn anything?

16. What extra-curricular activities helped you in obtaining or keeping your job?

17. Did you learn better from lectures, class discussion, or hands on classes? Why?

18. What teaching and learning equipment was beneficial to

your learning?

19. What equipment have you heard about or have become familiar with that you think your school should have had and did not have?

20. Did any class help you learn how to get along on a job? Please explain.

21. Did any class help you learn to resolve personal problems? Please explain.

22. Did your teachers seem up to date on teaching the subject currently.

23. Were your classes small enought for you to receive necessary attention and help from your teacher?

24. Were the skills you learned in your vocational education classes adequate to find a job, or did you have to attain additional training?

25. Did too many required courses keep you from taking desired vocational educational courses?

26. Did your vocational educational courses keep you from having room to take classes needed for acceptance into a post secondary educational program?

27. Did career day programs influence your career decision? How?

28. Did a particular teacher or class help you make a career decision?

29. Once you decided upon a career, were classes offered that helped you to meet entry level requirements?

30. Once you decided upon a career, were classes offered to enable you to meet college entrance requirements for that specific career?

31. Were you "blocked" into a certain curriculum and unable to take classes that were offered but not to you? Which ones would you like to have taken?

32. Did you graduate from high school?

33. If your answer to 32 in no, very briefly explain why?

34. Did most of your high school friends graduate?

35. Did your high school friends have career goals similar to yours?

36. Did your parents encourage you to enter a particular field? Why?

37. If employed, why did you select this particular job?

38. Have you ever been fired from a job? If yes, why?

39. Did you ever consider starting your own business in the future?

40. Did you learn anything about small business management in any high school class? Which one?